



*Napoleon:
The Man Behind the Myth*

Adam Zamoyski

London: William Collins, 2018

Review by: Jonathan North



Napoleon: The Man Behind the Myth. By Adam Zamoyski. London: William Collins, 2018. ISBN 978-0-008-11607-1. xxiii + 752 pp. £30.00.

The pharmacist Pierre-Irénée Jacob arrived in Madrid on 7 April 1809. The French had occupied the capital and were attempting to conquer the rest of the Iberian Peninsula in a war that would drain blood and treasure from Napoleon's empire for the next six years. The atmosphere in the city was strange and strained. On the one hand, the emperor Napoleon's power seemed to have reached new heights and his sway, with an opulent Paris at its centre, extended from Galicia in Spain to Galicia in Poland. On the other, here was a land mired in an unnecessary conflict so brutal and costly that it would inspire Goya's *Disasters of War*. Jacob, who had seen plenty of disasters on his way to Madrid, was relieved to have arrived and hurried to meet with his superior, Charles Jean Laubert. They were soon involved in a lively discussion about the man who had sent them to Spain. In his *Journal et itinéraire de dix années de campagne*, Jacob admitted that "the qualities of the emperor could not convince me to like him as a person," and confessed that "his political mistakes, especially after 1808, had turned me against him." Then Laubert, "after having praised some of the achievements of this extraordinary and highly intelligent man," surprised Jacob by suddenly exclaiming "what a monster, my friend, what a monster."

In a sense, opinions on Napoleon have not moved on much since that frank exchange. This might seem a strange thing to say, as, unlike Jacob and Laubert, we know that much of the Napoleonic drama was still to follow, from the marriage alliance with the Austrian Habsburgs to the catastrophe in Russia, and the pointless gamble at Waterloo. We also, of course, have a better perspective than the two men, enjoying the advantage of being able to assess Napoleon's legacy at leisure, and ruminate broadly on his impact on law, government, and the established order.

However, admitting an inability to add much more to that contemporary interpretation of Napoleon's character would also require us to ask why recent biographies of Napoleon have not been able to advance the argument about who he was very much further. Not to say that merely retelling the story of his life, with some of the details changed, is entirely pointless; after all, it provides work for writers and royalties for publishers. Yet, when faced with the prospect of another lengthy tome, perhaps the time has come to ask whether we really need another biography of Napoleon. The answer might be yes if something revolutionary had been discovered in the archives, or if the detailed studies produced over the last twenty years focusing on particular aspects of Napoleon's life, philosophy, and ability had been

skilfully synthesised to produce a radical new re-interpretation of his life and times.

Those in charge of promoting Adam Zamoyski's new biography, *Napoleon: The Man Behind the Myth* (not least the author himself), have certainly tried their best to convince us that we have before us just such a radical new re-interpretation. Here, they claim, is a much-needed critique of some of the half-truths that have polluted an objective assessment of the victor of Marengo and Austerlitz, the self-crowned emperor who pulled France to the heights of glory for a decade and to the sweet depths of nostalgia for the century beyond.

The idea that we now have an opportunity to see the real Napoleon sounds intriguing and Zamoyski, who produced an account of studied elegance on the Congress of Vienna that closed Napoleon's career, has the right credentials to undertake it. His promise of new angles and bracing re-interpretations gave hope that he might lift the baton of originality from the depths of the knapsack, and teach us something new about the man and the way we construct our myths. Zamoyski makes a gallant early attempt to seize and hold our attention. He opens with his theory that Napoleon was just a man, and, in many respects, just an ordinary one. Not a genius, not a monster, a mere mortal, luckier than most. These are the bold statements made in the work's preface. They are also repeated in the best part of the book, those chapters that deal with Napoleon before he was significant. Indeed, those passages do provide some genuinely interesting reflections and useful detail. Yet, by the time we get to Napoleon as a historical figure of note a few chapters later, it soon becomes apparent that however bold this argument seems, it cannot be sustained now that Napoleon is showing genius, cunning, political acumen, and military skill. Zamoyski's ordinary but lucky theory is just not convincing, nor, might I add, is it a new.

Napoleon rose to fame in Italy, leading demoralised and shoeless troops against the most respected military machine on the continent of Europe. He beat it again and again. He then capitalised on military victory to launch a political campaign against an entrenched elite, navigating his way through a byzantine world of intrigue, using or manipulating factions and cliques, and finally seizing control to crown ten years of revolution with a regime in which he was the government. Facts cannot be stretched to fit the notion that this was lucky and by the time the book gets into its stride Zamoyski has a hard time trying, so much so that he soon gives up, preferring to distract with spirited re-tellings of Napoleon's blunders along the way. The handling of the years after 1800 is very uneven, and the way Napoleon advanced French interests, conceived and imposed the French empire, and sought a Napoleonic legacy across Europe is poorly relayed.

Inevitably, the ambitious claim of showing us the true Napoleon not only falters before the facts, but it also suffers through Zamoyski's desire to entertain. His writing reflects a preference for court gossip and tittle-tattle, just the kind of myth-making that he supposedly spurned, rather than tackling the more complex questions. The result is a biography that is, paradoxically, long but lightweight. It is also uneven. He presents a rather confused picture of French politics after Toulon (chapters 8 and 9); he has General Murat wounded at Alexandria rather than Aboukir (185); he states that the Conspiracy of the Daggers was carried out on 10 November rather than 10 October, and states that there was no trial, whereas the trial took place and the proceedings were published soon afterwards (282–284); and his account of Waterloo seems hurried, as though by then he knew he had exceeded his contractual word limit. This undermines confidence in the work, and in its argument, and means that it just does not live up to the claims it makes about itself (617–619).

And without realising its ambitious claims, it is just another biography on Napoleon. Entertaining? It has its moments. Useful? Perhaps, if Andrew Robert's recent, and overly flattering, portrayal of the Corsican in his *Napoleon the Great* (2014), was not to your taste. But necessary? Well, Jacob and Laubert were more nuanced and had a better and shorter theory.

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